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# Indian 'Commercial Fiction' in English, the Publishing Industry and Youth Culture

SUMAN GUPTA

There are two ways in which we can contemplate the global/local dimension in relation to Indian commercial fiction in English: first, in terms of processes of publication and circulation (the means of production); and, second, in terms of the broad characteristics and reception of such fiction (product and consumption). This paper discusses Indian commercial fiction in English since the 1980s and offers some more or less speculative observations on what is produced with the expectation that it will enjoy a profitable career in the Indian market.

The means of production for literature in English have seen significant changes in India since the late 1980s. A remarkable proliferation of both independent and international publishers has taken place. In relation to "Indian English" literature, the current phase of development can be traced back to the independent publisher Ravi Dayal's (established in 1988) success with Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and to the setting up of Penguin India in 1985. A corresponding diversification in categories and genres of such literature has evidently occurred. Within the Indian market, Indian "commercial fiction" in English has unquestionably been the principal area of diversification, while "literary fiction" in English – as much a market category as commercial fiction – and translations from Indian languages have become more varied and numerous too.

This paper is addressed to Indian commercial fiction in English since the 1980s, or broadly in the contemporary period. It offers some more or less speculative observations on the Indian fiction in English which is produced with the expectation that it will enjoy a profitable career within the Indian market. Though this kind of fiction has a significant presence in India, it is little known and only perfunctorily registered elsewhere. For the purposes of this paper, commercial fiction is characterised more emphatically by market performance than the intrinsic features of texts, than the putative generic features, themes and stylistic devices that can be discerned in specific texts. Here I offer neither readings of particular texts nor a survey of such texts and authors. The observations here approach commercial fiction tangentially, in terms of some available evidence of production, circulation and reception, and the inferences that follow with Indian social circumstances in view. These could be regarded as observations which may usefully precede a systematic critical engagement with contemporary Indian commercial fiction texts.

## Commercial and Literary

The Indian commercial fiction in English which circulates predominantly within the country can be regarded as reasonably distinct from the "literary fiction" in English which has a larger-than-Indian presence. Neither are, however, mutually impervious or exclusive areas. Despite numerous efforts to describe these terms according to content – as if texts have immanent qualities of commercialness and literariness – both are plausibly understood as market-led categories (on this point, see Gupta 2009: Chapter 6). Both make pre-eminent sense in terms of appealing to and anticipating specific sorts of readership, and being designed, published, circulated and discussed or disregarded accordingly.

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In a general way, literary fiction evidently has greater international visibility and is occasionally regarded as coeval with “Indian English literature” per se. This is so especially outside India but sometimes within India too, in academic circles and establishment cultural discourses (to do with prizes, reviewing, literary festivals and events, etc). Naturally, this does not mean that all Indian literary fiction has such international visibility; much that is published as such, even recipients of Sahitya Akademi awards, do not go far in the Indian market and travel indifferently abroad. But success in literary fiction is measured by texts which have circulated well in a wider Anglo-American market, and have enjoyed concordant critical attention and cultural currency. What is produced and consumed as Indian commercial fiction in English is generally regarded as matter of internal interest. It is consumed primarily within India, seen to display a kind of “Indianness” that Indians appreciate, and is not meant to be taken “seriously” or regarded as “literary”. Literary fiction is the respectable public face of Indian literature in English abroad and at home, while commercial fiction is the gossip café of Indian writing in English at home.

Numerous academic surveys and commentaries on Indian fiction in English dwell exclusively on “literary fiction”, and establish a canon which functions as both repository and confirmation of literariness. The contemporary canon consists in a roll call such as: Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Shashi Tharoor, Allan Sealy, Anita Nair, Vikram Chandra, Kiran Desai, Mukul Keshavan, Rupa Bajwa, Arvind Adiga, Rana Dasgupta, and so on. Most are mentioned in no particular order, but the progenitor at the top of the list is usually Rushdie and the novel that sets this phase rolling is *Midnight’s Children* (1981). Rushdie is (slightly ironically) the “messiah” of the Indian English literary “renaissance” from the 1980s in John Mee’s survey of novels in the 1980s and 1990s (2003: 318); and, similarly, most highly-regarded novels over the same period are *Midnight’s Children* in Naik and Narayan’s (2001, Chapter 3) survey covering 1980-2000. As the next decade progresses, we find Chaudhuri (2008: 113-21) concerned about the superlative significance given to Rushdie’s work, and Rajan (2011: 203-30) still charting new developments from *After Midnight’s Children*.

### Authority of the Publishing Professional

It is primarily in a non-academic register that the burgeoning Indian commercial fiction is registered: in claims made by publishers and other professionals and authors in the mass media (particularly newspapers and magazines). Such claims come with an alternative-to-academic authority; also a matter of expertise, but hands-on expertise in production processes and reading markets rather than in studied critical understanding. Publishing professionals are apt to be cited as experts. The lines of expertise between academic and publishing professional discourses are generally fairly clearly drawn. The former are predominantly ensconced in scholarly forums and confined mainly to literary fiction, the latter in mass media forums and devoted to both Indian “literary” and “commercial” fiction in English. While the former attend to the nuances of postcoloniality and (literary) history, the latter gesture

towards globalisation and the transcendence of the present. When the former pronounce on the quality of literary fiction, the latter agree and offer disclaimers about the literariness of commercial fiction and point to their market penetration.

There is an air of heroism about the authority of the publishing professional apropos Indian fiction in English. They appear at the cutting edge of literary production, while academic criticism appears after the fact. Especially in relation to commercial fiction, publishing professionals increasingly partake of a sort of greater authorship: they seem to speak as authors of a commercial field of literary production and reception in which the immediate authors – the functional writers of commercial fiction – contribute in a subsidiary way. Publishing professionals are allocated their own record and narrative as super-authorial figures through interviews and addresses (some collected, for instance, by Ghai 2008a, b), and embody a much-discussed growth industry (much as call centre workers did for the Indian outsourcing industry recently). Publishers sometimes speak candidly of their stronger sense of authorship in India than their counterparts may feel elsewhere. After moving from Bloomsbury UK to Random House India, publisher Chiki Sarkar (2009) thus found that she is having “so much fun” because she can decide what sorts of books she wants to publish and then find authors for them and suitable media coverage. By way of repartee, Aditya Sudarshan (2010) opined that “Indian publishing needs to get less fun” because “kitsch” (read commercial fiction) was beginning to dominate the Indian English fiction lists – not because readers or writers necessarily want it, but “because our editors felt like it”.

At any rate, while the academic expert places Rushdie as progenitor of contemporary Indian literary fiction in English, the publishing expert appoints Chetan Bhagat, the same for commercial fiction. So, a 2007 report in *The Hindustan Times* observed: “Why did we stop looking down on commercial writing? The answer, say publishers, can be found in two words: Chetan Bhagat” (Gulab 2007). And, similarly, an article from *The Telegraph* (Calcutta) opined:

It’s not as if Indian writers never penned commercial fiction before. [...] But this never developed into a body of work. That has changed ever since bestselling author Chetan Bhagat hit the scene (Dua 2009).

Bhagat’s role in the recent great leap forward of Indian commercial fiction in English is widely acknowledged. Irrespective of the aptness of Bhagat’s progenitor status (his *Five Point Someone* was published in 2004, while Shobhaa De’s *Socialite Nights*, 1989, and Anurag Mathur’s *The Inscrutable Americans*, 1991, have strong pioneering claims for the contemporary commercial fiction field), the career of his novels does typify the kind of production and circulation that this paper is concerned with.

It is often noted that sales figures set Bhagat’s novels apart from contenders, and these put the scope and scale of the Indian market for commercial fiction into perspective. By 2008, *Five Point Someone* (2004) had reportedly sold 7,00,000 copies in India, and Bhagat’s 2008 novel *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008) had a first print run of 2,00,000 copies (Mahapatra 2008). Within India, for English language fictional works, this is equalled only by phenomenally successful international bestsellers: in 2005, J K Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* reportedly sold over 1,00,000 copies on the first day (Ahmad 2005), and in 2007

around 2,40,000 copies of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* were pre-ordered in India before release (Raja M 2007). Rowling's novels were, of course, considerably more expensive; at under Rs 100 Bhagat's novels were produced to be affordable. According to Bhagat's publishers Rupa, their other successful books sell 40-50,000 copies (Fernandes 2010: 21). However, this success in the domestic market is not reflected in the international passages of Bhagat's novels. *Five Point Someone* (2004) did not find a co-publication deal abroad. As a result of news-fuelled awareness of outsourcing in Britain and the United States, *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005) did, and was co-published by Transworld Publishers (UK) and Ballantine Books (USA) in 2007. Large internet vendors outside India, such as Amazon USA and Amazon UK, have consistently shown modest sales rankings for both.

Bhagat's novels have largely escaped scholarly attention. He gets an incidental mention in a footnote in Rajan's 2011 survey of post-*Midnight's Children* novels; and even in Tabish Khair's 2008 (pp 59-74) overview of "Indian pulp fiction in English", Bhagat fails to make an appearance. Naturally, Bhagat's work has received prolific mass media attention and numerous reviews in Indian broadsheets and magazines. These are unanimous in doubting Bhagat's "literary" achievement: "with the release of his third book [...] Chetan Bhagat has made one thing quite clear. He really isn't a great writer. This shouldn't come as news to the Indian literary establishment" (Menon 2008: 71). Equally, such reports have been continuously struck by the fact that his novels sell quite as many copies as reported. Bhagat's work has received some mass media attention outside India, the tone of which speaks for itself. Bhagat was introduced thus to readers of *The Guardian*: "He is the biggest-selling writer in English you've never heard of" (Ramesh 2008); and with the following to *Observer* readers: "For (Indian) people (of the 'outsourcing generation'), there is only one author: Chetan Bhagat, who?" (McCrum 2010). Whether in India or elsewhere, the tone says that it does not really matter to us what Bhagat writes, we would not get much from reading his texts; what matters is that they read him prolifically – those Bhagat readers in India. These other readers are somehow symptomatised in Bhagat's success, and their reading Bhagat symptomatises something. They are characterised in literary features as a new kind of readership. According to a *New York Times* article: "Mr Bhagat might not be another Vikram Seth or Arundhati Roy, but he has authentic claims to being one of the voices of a generation of middle class Indian youth facing the choices and frustrations that come with the prospect of growing wealth" (Greenlees 2008). All who have written about Bhagat, in India or elsewhere, agree on this: the Chetan Bhagat "phenomenon", in brief, has something to do with middle class youth in India, and something to do with India's growing affluence and presence in a globalised world and consequently strengthened sense of national/local identity.

Bhagat is, as I have observed above, the tip of the iceberg of Indian commercial fiction in English. Much that can be said about the tip applies to the iceberg generally. Numerous enthusiastic reports have appeared around the turn of the 2010s about the continuing "boom" in English language fiction in India (Kramatschek 2007; Kumar 2009, Tarafdar 2010; Dua 2009; Khan 2010; Gulab 2010; Ghosh 2011; Pathak 2011; Sarkar 2011).

These register a rapid proliferation of commercial fiction along the lines of "genre" categories: detective fiction, science fiction and fantasies, chick lit, romances, campus novels, graphic novels, etc. Differentiations among producers and consumers are noted in these: for instance, the degree to which both international publishers (with India establishments) and independent publishers are promoting genre fiction, and which categories are selling particularly well or are yet to reach their full potential. A growing divide between commercial fiction for Indian readers and literary fiction for Indian and international consumption is occasionally perceived, and sometimes it is suggested that interest in producing the latter is perhaps suffering (Ghosh 2011). The great majority are sanguine about such a dip in literary fiction and celebratory about the growth and potential of commercial fiction. The celebratory tone is obviously about the economic prospects for the publishing industry in India, but extends also to the changing sociocultural environment which is evidenced thereby. The key points about the latter were summarised usefully by Claudia Kramatschek, and coincide with media commentary on the popularity of Bhagat's novels:

Many Indian authors – especially younger ones – will tell you that they experience a certain pressure, strengthened by internationally active publishers, to act as cultural ambassadors. In other words, either to turn out 'spice and curry' in the form of easily-digestible novels of the exotic variety, or else elucidations of 'Indianness' as such.

But a younger generation of authors now appears to have emerged in the English-language literary sector whose common development manifests a kind of caesura. All are between 25 and 35 years of age – a fact which in and of itself represents a minor revolution in a country where the aura of the senior writer has always shaped the literary canon. All came of age in an India where access to the wider world was available via mouse click, and all feel at home within the most divergent cultures – and they play with this intercultural network in their literary work as well. At the same time, nonetheless, they are rooted in India to an astonishing degree, and they write about this sense of connection in new and innovative – and at times surprising – ways. A marked turn toward localism is observable, meaning toward the micro cosmos of one's own lived world, to the history of the individual towns where these authors lead their lives. In literary terms, this return is associated with an opening toward genre literature and toward what might be referred to as the small form (Kramatschek 2007).

There we have it again: the condition of English language commercial fiction in India has something to do with the English-speaking middle-class youth, and something to do with global awareness or globalisation processes in relation to a changing sense of national awareness or local lives. These are obviously closely intertwined; arguably it is the youth in question who cultivate the local/global awareness, and equally this awareness in question appeals to the youth.

Some attention to these two entwined factors in relation to English language commercial fiction in India seems to be called for. Two sections consequently follow: on "local/global" India and Indian "middle-class youth" culture.

### Local/Global

There are two ways in which we can contemplate the global/local dimension in relation to Indian commercial fiction in English: first, in terms of processes of publication and circulation (the

means of production); and, second, in terms of the broad characteristics and reception of such fiction (product and consumption).

The story of commercial fiction publishing is part of a larger story about the growth of the Indian publishing sector. In terms of absolute figures this is an impressively large and diverse sector. According to Pathak (2011), 12,375 publishers were registered with the ISBN India agency at the end of 2007, with an estimated 90,000 titles being produced each year, and with the industry showing an optimistic growth estimate of 30%. The English-language element in this has superlative visibility because it is nationally and internationally accessible. International interest in the Indian publishing industry is evidenced in various ways. Most significantly, Indian subsidiaries of international publishing corporations enjoy a considerable media and commercial presence. The Association of Publishers in India (API), the representative body of such publishers, lists 27 members for 2010-11. Beyond that, international interest is charted through: various market reports commissioned abroad (such as Khullar Management and Financial Investment Services 1999; Rob Francis 2003 [2008]); particular attention at book fairs (India was special guest at the Frankfurt Book Fair, 4-8 October 2006; and featured prominently in the Paris Book Fair, 22-27 May 2007); and other initiatives (e.g. in 2010 the British Council established the Young Publishing Entrepreneur Award for young publishers in India to network in the UK). The prospects for exporting Indian English-language publications have been under occasional scrutiny (Pathak 2011), and various economic and legal constraints discussed.

### A Global Template

These might be regarded as signs of the globalisation (and certainly of a growing global presence) of the Indian publishing industry, but that does not mean Indian commercial fiction in English (the product) has a global presence. That is an important distinction. As I have observed above, successful commercial fiction (such as Bhagat's) is produced mainly for circulation within India and travels indifferently elsewhere. The international publishers in India are there to generate profits by entering the Indian reading market, not by opening up Indian commercial fiction to an international market. The great bulk of commercial fiction produced by Penguin India, Harper Collins India, Hachette India, and so on, is only distributed within India. The international reports and initiatives mentioned above are more so that international publishers are able to mould and exploit Indian products (commercial fiction) and consumers (the reading market), and very much less so as to generate Indian products which can be used to exploit the international market. The idea is to set up an internal cycle of production and consumption which international publishers can tap into, rather than to make Indian products a global commodity. From the international corporation's perspective, Indian commercial fiction is a gigantic niche market enterprise. It is unclear to what extent the advent of international publishers might have affected independent publishing. Independent publishers in India may have stoked the flames of commercial fiction which international publishers have fanned since, may benefit from the large-scale moulding of production and consumption that international publishers undertake, and may

also be pushed more emphatically into ever smaller niches within India. The general experience in Britain and the United States (US) is that independent publishers tend to be consumed by international corporations (see Schriffrin 2000; Feather 2003); in India (I gathered from conversations with independent publishers) it is held that the market capacity is so large that international and independent publishers can both thrive in a symbiotic relationship. Sometimes Indian independent publishers are able to make useful co-publication deals with their counterparts abroad or with international publishers within.

An on-the-ground presence in India offers further advantages for global players which are unavailable to independent publishers. It enables, for instance, exploitation of the uneven flow of commercial fiction. Not only are international publishers able to tap into the contained circuit of Indian commercial fiction, they are also in a position to regulate the inflow of commercial fiction that they publish elsewhere – primarily British and American commercial fiction. The latter have a well-established place in the Indian market, but whereas much of their distribution worked through the pirated book market (or, occasionally, through cheap legal reprints) till the 1990s, now international corporations are able to regulate the situation to some extent themselves. So, Harper Collins India, Random House India, Penguin India, and so on are able to produce Indian commercial fiction in English and, at the same time, reprint their American and British commercial fiction lists for Indian readers, and set up their own distribution mechanisms for both. Further, it seems that the Indian market for commercial fiction by Indian emigrants in the United Kingdom (UK) or the US coincides with the confined market for Indian commercial fiction in English – a presence in the Indian market is a useful position for international publishers to promote writings by Indian emigrants published first in other territories.

The globalisation of the Indian publishing industry is easily charted through the presence of international publishers, but that is far from being the central feature of the process. More importantly, a global template of commercial fiction production and circulation has been imported and adapted for the Indian market. To begin with, this has to do with the structure of "genre fiction" in terms of which production and circulation of Indian commercial fiction in English is now routinely mediated: the above-noted proliferation of science fiction, detective fiction, chick lit, science fiction, fantasy, graphic novels, campus novels, etc, replicates categorisation and packaging and marketing practices which have been tried and tested over a considerable period in the UK, the US, and elsewhere. This entire structure has been imported wholesale into the Indian publishing industry and book market within a compressed period of a couple of decades. The precise ways in which this structure has been adapted (rather than simply mimicked) for Indian consumers, is matter for considered research and analysis – a detailed exposition is beyond the scope of this paper. It is possible that certain expectations and experiences associated with older traditions of commercial fiction production in Indian languages have been integrated within the global template. Some research has already been devoted to the predecessors of these "genres" in Indian languages or earlier English-language productions, themselves often inspired by



colonial commercial fiction from Britain: e.g., Chandra (2008) for comics; Roy (2008) for Bengali detective fiction; Mathur (2006) and Orsini (2004) for detective fiction in the colonial period; Sengupta (2003: 76-82) for Bengali science fiction; Daechsel (2003) for Urdu detective fiction; and Khair (2008) gives a history of “Indian English pulp fiction” before Shobhaa De. These are worth looking at closely in relation to current production and marketing and circulation. Further, particular approaches to the English language, and social themes of specific moment in India, have played their part in the Indian adaptation of the global commercial fiction publishing template. These have enabled localisation of the products fitted into the global template, without disturbing the structural coherence of the latter. Brief notes on such localisation follow soon.

Beyond structuring in terms of “genre” categories, the global publishing template also involves norms of material production – meeting “global standards” in the physical appearance and shaping of the book (on this, see Ahuja 2004: 24-27). The recently (post-1990) diversified channels of formal recognition through corporation-sponsored prizes, mass media-based “bestseller” listings, creation of celebrity profiles, adaptations into films, etc., also concretise the Indian importation of a global template. So do ongoing developments in retailing practices, from such micro-matters such as how bookshops should be arranged to macro-matters like establishing book-retailing chains.

### Indian English and the Indian Context

While such globalisation of the Indian book industry unfolds, the commercial fiction products (texts) themselves are designed for and circulated within an emphatically contained national or local sphere. The discourse that articulates this circulatory matrix is referred to Indian texts by Indian authors being produced in India for Indian readers. In other words, this is a circuit of Indians talking to Indians in a closed space, a national space, albeit in the most international of languages. Localisation of practice here is evidently in the service of globalisation for the publishing industry; it is the local product and circuit instrumentalised for structural globalisation and for the benefit of international corporations. Despite the oft-mooted antithetical positioning of globalisation/commercial fiction/popular reception and postcolonialism/literary fiction/academic discernment (discussed earlier), there is arguably no significant opposition: no noteworthy flow away from postcolonial hangover towards globalised-localised (“glocalised”) aspirations. The geopolitics of transfer and exploitation, the structuring of knowledge and know-how, present a convergent dynamics in accounts of globalisation-localisation and accounts of postcoloniality. Nevertheless, the burgeoning Indian commercial fiction in English is perceivably new and different from, and even resistant to, the established Indian English literary fiction. It makes a claim of local rootedness, of national resurgence, which could be unpacked further – without, as I decided above, immediately undertaking textual analyses or surveys.

The localisation that plays with the global template could be described variously. To begin with, the most global of languages is itself the site for localisation in Indian commercial fiction in

English. On the one hand, since the 1990s, cross-border commercial enterprise (strongly associated with business process outsourcing) has resulted in an upward revaluation of “standard” English as cultural capital. On the other hand, with increasing use in everyday life the distinctiveness of Indian English usage has become more a repository of claims and anxieties about national identity than prior to the 1990s. Unsurprisingly, the use of a distinctively Indian idiom or of “homegrown English” is regarded as a key reason for the recent success of Indian commercial fiction in English, i.e., “the quick-fire campus English that young Indians use” (Ramesh 2008; McCrum 2010), “English as unpretentious as a call-centre cubicle” (Thottam 2008). A close analysis of such distinctive Indian English usage in fiction, with its regionally varied enunciations, syntax transferred from regional languages, code-switchings, idiomatic Indianisms and so on (cf Sailaja 2009; Sedlatschek 2009; Sethi 2011) requires more space than this paper has.

In brief, however, the distinctiveness of Indian English usage in commercial fiction could be understood in terms of its familiarised relationship with the Indian context. This is an oft-mooted argument in the discussions cited above: Indian commercial fiction in English, the argument goes, is geared expressively for an internal Indian audience and therefore does not need to be explanatory and demonstrative in the way that literary fiction, with a potentially international readership, feels it should be. The latter is what Kramatschek (2007), quoted above, described as “easily-digestible novels of the exotic variety, or else elucidations of ‘Indianness’ as such”; or, in Choudhury’s words:

As the Indian novel in English, assisted by India’s rising profile in global affairs, finds an audience wherever English is spoken, it often seems to sacrifice the particularities of Indian experience for a watered-down idiom that can speak to readers across the globe (Choudhury 2009: 96).

These are descriptions of a defamiliarised relationship between the English language (for literature) and the Indian context. Underlying commercial fiction’s claim of a familiarised relationship between language and context, we may detect insecurities related to some essentialist notion of Indian identity or nationalistic protectiveness about India’s “image” abroad – both, perhaps, ultimately anxieties about the status of English in India itself. Such anxieties are eloquently expressed in the form of the following questions in a 2010 news feature:

If you write in what’s called The Queen’s English without the phrasing that may be grammatically incorrect in the UK but is how we usually speak English here, are you authentically Indian? On the other hand, if you write about villages or urban underbellies, are you not catering to a western readership with a taste for the exotic, rather than a homegrown Indian one? (Gulab 2010).

At any rate, it appears to be held that writing fiction about India in English has almost inevitably been an act of defamiliarisation, and yet paradoxically English is an Indian language and should have the capacity of familiarised usage for fiction. Indian commercial fiction in English, à la Bhagat and others, has now hit upon it, it is averred: by eliding explanations and an exotic sensibility, by using English as if it is habitual within the locale that is described, as if English is “native” to the Indian habitus.

The tacit drift towards enclosure and “authentic” Indianness, the apprehensions about exoticisation and exposure to “foreigners”, in such arguments seem wholly dubious to me (and possibly dangerous in the way that religious communalism is dangerous). Perhaps such arguments are after the fact: the fact is that such commercial fiction has a predetermined circulation within India – it is designed to exploit the Indian reading market in English rather than internationalise Indian “commercial literature” in English – and such arguments may well be market-inspired. Possibly, these sentiments about Indian distinctiveness are offered in a spirit of the post-factum affirmation that industrial success is routinely greeted with. If we went along with Graham Huggan’s analysis of homogenisation and othering (exoticisation) in practices of “postcoloniality” that render India as a sort of brand, India as “more available than ever for consumption” (Huggan 2001: 82), then this need not simply operate at the mismatched boundary of the “western” imperialist gaze and the diverse interior of India. It could just as well work within India. Arguably, the cultivated localisation that operates through English in Indian commercial fiction, emphatically for internal circulation within a global publishing template, involves an internal branding of India for internal consumption. This could be a kind of internal branding in much the way that “ethnic” clothing or “vedic life-style” commodities are internal brands for the nation within India.

By being unlinked to a regional place within India, English’s localised and familiarised idiom in commercial fiction provides a useful medium for internally branding the nation. Reviewers of such fiction do not approach the texts as regional. They may be identified with urban locations, as “Delhi-resident authors” and “small town stories” and so on; mostly, they are simply expressions of India per se, their success symptomatises India as a whole, their authors embody their Indian identities over their regional identities by dint of writing in English. Commercial fiction in Indian languages, even when translated into English (translations from Indian languages into English is also a much-referred “boom” area), however, carry the weight of their regional identities with them. Satyajit Ray’s *Feluda* detective stories or Saradindu Bandyopadhyay’s *Byomkesh Bakshi* detective stories (both available in several English language editions) are strongly associated with their Bengali settings and authorship. In some cases, the regional identity of such commercial fiction works as a distancing device, so that the English translation is presented not so much as commercial fiction any longer but more as an object of ethnographic interest for the Indian reader. *The Bhaft Anthology of Tamil Pulp Fiction* (Chakravarthy 2008) is a case in point: to announce a collection as “pulp fiction” is to take the contents out of the circuit of being consumed as pulp fiction and put them in the circuit of being looked at as pulp fiction – with the regional “place” of this phenomenon foregrounded. Reviewers of the English translations of Hindi thriller writer Surender Mohan Pathak’s novels (which started being published in 2009) obviously had to mediate across considerable internal distances to introduce them to Indian readers of English language fiction – with observations like: “One reason why the books are catching on is that they represent a different world” (Swamy 2010); “Long labelled lowbrow, these big sellers of small-town Hindustan have usually been printed on cheap paper ... and sold for a song” (Raaj 2009). The translator of Pathak’s

novels, Sudarshan Purohit, wrote a somewhat sad article on the low sales of the translations, wondering whether:

We might be in this situation because we’ve imported the whole business of English books – writing, buying, marketing, even the genre names on the bookshelves, from the Western books ecosystem. This includes the reviewing and the top ten lists and the contacts with the press – everything that constitutes the hype that sells the books. Publishers in other languages are still waking up to the fact that the English publishing industry is dominating the literary supplements (Purohit 2010).

The “western books ecosystem”, which is more or less what I have called the global template for commercial fiction publishing, allows for a non-regionalised sort of localism to exist within the internal circuit of Indian commercial fiction in English.

These observations raise an obvious question: who takes possession of this brand, substantiates the circulatory matrix of Indian commercial fiction in English, and actualises the “glocal” existence and national consolidation it reflects? In the newspaper and magazine articles I have cited above, the answer is pat and unanimous: it is the middle-class Indian youth.

### Middle-Class Youth

Two surveys give some indication of the character and attitudes of this reading constituency: a CSDS-KAS (de Souza et al 2009) survey of social attitudes among Indian youth, and a NBT-NCAER (Shukla 2010) Indian youth readership survey. The CSDS-KAS 2009 survey uses data collected from around 5,000 respondents, aged between 14 and 34, more or less evenly distributed across the country with some booster samples from areas with high population density (towns); and the NBT-NCAER 2010 survey covered 3,11,431 literate youth (13-35 year olds), across 207 rural districts and 199 towns in India. The latter estimates the youth population of India to be 459 million (38% of the total), of which 333 million is literate. Of the literate youth, this survey indicates, about 25% read books for pleasure, relaxation and knowledge enhancement; and English is the preferred language for leisure reading of 5.3% of those (Hindi is for 33.4%, Marathi 13.2%, Bengali 7.7%). By these figures, the number of readers of an extraordinarily successful English language commercial fiction book is unlikely to exceed 4.41 million. As a proportion of India’s youth population this is a minuscule figure, but as an absolute figure for commercial fiction publishers to aspire to this is fairly respectable. The actual figure will be considerably lower when we take into account that fiction is the preferred genre for 42% of youth: if that breaks down proportionally for the languages, for English that would mean around 1.85 million readers (but maybe more English language readers prefer fiction). Further, this is a very wide age group for the survey (13 to 35), and quite possibly a commercial fiction book targeting, for instance, any particular group of readers (women, professionals, university students, etc) may not appeal to a considerable range here. Incidentally, according to this survey the internet is accessed by only 3.7% of youth, of which a mere 4% use it for reading books online and a tiny 1.2% use it to search for book titles. We can assume that the great majority of those with access to the internet have some level of proficiency in the English language.

The CSDS-KAS 2009 survey gives little indication of reading habits, and focuses more on tv and film viewing. It comes up with

the figure of 12% of respondents claiming to use the internet, as opposed to 3.7% quoted above – but the latter has a much larger sample and is statistically more reliable. The CSDS-KAS 2009 survey, however, usefully gestures towards an interesting mix of social and cultural attitudes among youth in general which may well have a bearing on reading habits. The levels of interest in politics (46% think it is very or somewhat important) is high; significant proportions are well disposed towards other countries (except Pakistan); and more take democratic prerogatives and issues like gender equality and environmental sustainability, unemployment and poverty, seriously. However, 71% declare that they have not heard the word globalisation. Ninety-four per cent are believers. Some strong conservative tendencies seem to be indicated, especially in relation to marriage and sexual relations (67% feel that marriages should take place within one's caste community; 63% feel dating should be restricted, as against 32% who do not think so; 65% feel the final decision of marriage should rest with parents, as against 32% who feel it should be with those getting married), but also in other respects (e.g., with regard to the top five friends, 52% have none of the opposite sex, 54% none from another religion, 34% none from other castes; 66% think drinking alcohol is unacceptable). It is likely that these figures are quite different for the minority of English language readers, and very probable that the great majority of these would have heard of globalisation.

### Groundwork for Critical Engagement

What we have then is a complex picture of Indian youth culture in general, and a sense of the scale of leisure readership among those proficient in English. It is evidently a small proportion of youth, middle-class in a broad way (factoring in affluence, socio-cultural background and education in various combinations), which engages with Indian commercial fiction in English – and very likely a much smaller proportion that engages with “literary fiction”. The breadth of the readership of commercial fiction, relative to “literary fiction”, is apt to catch more of the complexity of attitudes among Indian youth in general. Indeed, there appears to be some evidence that this complexity is revealed in attitudes to the English language itself. Such attitudes are, it seems, pulled between the cultivation of social concerns and political awareness and the conservative tendencies that are evidenced above; similar contrary pulls are reflected, as I have noted in passing above, in cultivating the global cultural capital of English and making English a site for somewhat defiant localisation. For instance, Vineeta Chand's observations on ideological approaches to English among Indian youth, based on a qualitative survey of English/Hindi bilinguals in Delhi, are indicative here – and may well apply more widely in India:

These younger IE [Indian English] speakers [...] are English/Hindi bilinguals. Their entire education, through college, has been English-medium; they use English in intimate domains and with all technology (texting, e-mail, internet, etc); and their self-professed dominant language is English. And yet they are uncertain of how well their English meets external, global standards. This insecurity is a direct result of the disparate power relationship between inner-circle nations and third-world postcolonial outsourcing nations like India, where standard language ideologies directly affect individual and societal notions of fluency, competence and nativeness.

However, these youths also dialogically acknowledge that international normalised language practices, and their associated social authority, are not available for local uptake. They critically respond to local speakers who quickly acquire international language practices [...]. In India, discourse centres on ‘fake accents’, which typically emerge in high-school and college-age IE speakers who unnaturally acquire an American accent through limited contact with AE [American English] speakers or travel to the United States. These youths all had personal favourite stories highlighting the ridiculousness of fake accents and their response to such ‘wannabes’ [...] (Chand 2009: 411).

The success of Indian commercial fiction in English within India has possibly some connection to the anxiety and localised defiance that this quotation speaks of. Such fiction evades the perception of being fake and is regarded as domesticated and in a familiar local idiom; at the same time, such fiction appears to be structurally linked to global means of production in “standard” English (i.e., following that global template). Moreover, commercial fiction generally has an oft-noted conservative character which can nevertheless be manipulated towards subversive ends apropos the dominant establishment (on this, see Bloom 1996, particularly p 16, and Gallagher 2006, particularly p 15). Indian commercial fiction in English – disposed according to the global template amidst localisation – offers a similar crossroads, which is perhaps accommodative of the complex contrary pulls in social attitudes that the above surveys show for contemporary Indian youth.

The small class-bound scale of this youth readership of commercial fiction may raise doubts about the class-character of such fiction and the class-contradictions that their consumption feed. Such doubts may well be analogous to those expressed feelingly but impressionistically by Arun Saldanha in a study of affluent Indian youth (in Bangalore), who cultivate a western lifestyle (the focus here is on western music): doubts about the “interesting perverse form of exhibitionism/voyeurism” that such cultivation instantiates, and “othering” of the poor working class “peepers” that is involved (Saldanha 2002: 343-44). But the normative weight of such observations would, it seems to me, apply unevenly in relation to Indian commercial fiction in English. True, an increasing number of such productions revel in the blithe “fun” of a middle-class lifestyle: Penguin India's *Metro Reads* series, for instance, seeks to appeal to readers looking for “books which don't weigh you down with complicated stories, don't ask for much time” (<http://www.metroreads.in/>). However, in the midst of such a lightness of import we may find subversive as well as conservative strategies. And, it is certainly equally the case that Indian commercial fiction in English is also an arena for considering the unsavoury features of domestic hierarchies, sexual repression, class and gender inequalities, caste oppression (various independent publishers of fiction particularly focus on these, such as Zubaan, Navayana or Queer Ink). Bhagat has increasingly been striving to become a spokesman for the social conscience of Indian youth (see Ramesh 2008, among many others), and no doubt authors inspired by him have it in mind too. Before any normative pronouncements are offered, the texts in question need to be critically engaged, and these texts are a very mixed bag indeed.

This paper is intended to set out some of the groundwork which could lead into critical engagement with the texts, not to offer normative judgments.



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